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RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHFN #0154 0911704
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 311704Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1822
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS FREETOWN 000154

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W

E.O. 12958 N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM SL

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH DIASPORA PARLIAMENTARIANS

¶1. SUMMARY: On March 26, Ambassador Perry, the public affairs officer, and poloff met with 13 Members of Parliament (MPs) who have returned from the diaspora, as well as representatives of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Many in the group spent at least a decade in either the United States or the United Kingdom, and returned to Sierra Leone due to their sense of responsibility to their homeland to make a lasting, positive difference through fighting corruption and for human rights. The parliamentarians thanked the Ambassador for her support of democracy in Sierra Leone, and look forward to further support from the U.S. Government as the Sierra Leone continues to rebuild and develop. END SUMMARY.

The Parliamentarians: A Distinguished Group

¶2. The 13 Parliamentarians, of whom 3 are women, are all new to their political roles. While some are carrying on a family tradition of serving in a political office, many indicated that they chose to stand after receiving encouragement from their local communities and Paramount Chiefs. Despite their lack of experience in public life, their international experience and education made them likely candidates in the eyes of their electorate to represent their communities. Many received Bachelor's and advanced degrees from American and British universities, and have years of experience working for overseas companies and governments.

Partners in Promoting Western Ideals

¶3. The remarks from the visitors demonstrated that they hold the countries in which they lived, including the U.S., in very high esteem and now seek to bring what they learned abroad to Sierra Leone. Facilitating improvements in such areas as good governance, rule of law, gender equality and support for human rights, and the provision of basic services like education and health care, are of paramount importance to the group. Living in countries where these issues are regularly reviewed and addressed by well-functioning governments and civil society demonstrate the possibilities that can be achieved in Sierra Leone through proactive, responsible leadership and strengthened infrastructure. The examples set by countries such as the U.S., they said, will guide their work as public representatives, regardless of their party affiliation.

¶4. Given this commitment to support Western ideals and model of governance, the MPs voiced their hope that the U.S. Government will provide them with financial and technical assistance to carry out their mandates. They noted that they have no budgets with which to conduct programming in their own constituencies. While their ability to effect change at the policy level is obviously an important element of their job, they expressed concern that the public may not feel the positive effects quickly, nor associate such effects with their parliamentary representatives. U.S. programming support will assist them to demonstrate their work has a concrete impact at the local, as well as national, level.

15. The Ambassador stated that the diaspora plays a critical role in the country, particularly in the area of governance. Beyond addressing the large U.S.-funded initiatives, such as monetized food aid, trafficking in persons, programs to eliminate child labor, and support for civic participation in the local elections, she identified various assistance opportunities, including the Special Self-Help and Democracy and Human Rights Funds, and the Ambassador's Girls' Scholarship Fund. She explained that these funds can be accessed by the communities the parliamentarians represent. She also mentioned the International Visitors' Program as a positive way to increase awareness and professionalism among communities. The Ambassador challenged the Parliamentarians to transform their ideals into reality in Sierra Leone, implement change, and influence programs. She observed that African countries moving forward require strong anti-corruption action and gender equity.

15. COMMENT: Members of the diaspora are often well-respected in their communities because of their international experience and they can wield considerable influence. The parliamentarians represent the largest number from the diaspora who have ever returned to serve in Sierra Leone's parliament. Their leadership and support for improving areas of mutual concern, such as good governance and rule of law, could have a sizeable impact on the shape of the government's agenda. Continued communication and assistance with this group will be an important investment in advancing elements of the mission's strategic plan. END COMMENT.

PERRY